

# Chapter 5

## **The rise of branded alcoholic drinks in West Africa**

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'I want Stork brand', wrote Accra merchant Alexander Bruce in a letter to the Henkes distillery in 1887, ordering 500 cases of gin.<sup>1</sup> According to Bruce, the Stork brand was 'very marketable' and sold faster than the other brands he traded in. That this West African trader imported distilled liquor is not surprising, given how well-established the trade in imported liquor had become by the late-nineteenth century. What needs explaining, however, is his insistence on this specific brand.

The use of alcohol as psychoactive substance had been widespread throughout non-Islamic African societies for centuries. The literature on alcohol has shown how locally made millet beer, palm wine or mead was produced and consumed in West, East, Central and Southern Africa. Additionally, distilled liquors imported from Europe and the Americas have been traded for centuries in coastal West and Southern Africa and their hinterlands.<sup>2</sup> Everywhere, alcohol was a special drink. Its consumption was ritualised, linked with belonging to kinship or a wider group, and a required ingredient for funerals, weddings, or rites of passage. Its use was often associated with specific rituals related to the agricultural cycle, the pouring of libation, or the visiting of shrines. Furthermore, its use by particular groups or individuals in local society could indicate status or a specific function. The importance of alcohol for particular uses has been explained out of the specific psychoactive properties of alcohol, and out of features such as relative strength, taste, clarity and colour (or colourlessness, in certain cases).<sup>3</sup>

Until the twentieth century, branding does not appear to have been widespread as a consideration for purchase, or for the assigning of specific meanings to particular brands of liquor. Africans were not unique in this respect: branding was an innovation that emerged in the wake of the industrial revolution in Europe and subsequently spread around the world.<sup>4</sup> However, the context in which brands were introduced in African societies was very different from that in Europe, and the study of the rise of

branded drinks increases our understanding of the ways in which consumers assign meanings to specific goods and make choices about which product to buy and consume in which situation. By the mid-twentieth century, consumers in West Africa used only specific types of branded liquor for rituals, served their guests branded or unbranded liquor depending on specific circumstances, and made identity claims through the consumption of specific brands of bottled beers or whiskey. How brands became so ubiquitous in West Africa, and which meanings were assigned to them and by whom, is the topic of this chapter.

This focus on the rise of branded alcoholic drinks contributes to our understanding of three broader themes in African history: identity; agency; and local conceptualisations of modernity and tradition. Since the nineteenth century, different types of branded and non-branded alcohol have been variously associated with the modern or with the traditional. For example, while the association with ritual tended to draw imported rum and gin into the sphere of tradition, during the late-nineteenth century gin (along with other imported spirits) was also a 'modernising good', used by social elites to show their connection to the Atlantic economy, their understanding of sophisticated, international style, and their commitment to progress.<sup>5</sup> Throughout the chapter we will see how branding engaged with ideas about what is traditional and what is modern, but also that this connection was not straightforward or consistent: which drinks or which brands ended up being associated with either modernity or tradition was the outcome of processes of negotiation between traders, advertisers, and African consumers, and also involved those Africans who did not consume the specific drinks but who nevertheless took part in the moral debates about the uses and meanings of alcohol.

These debates also relate to the second theme of the agency of African consumers in the construction of markets and meanings. Another example of this local agency was the refusal to accept the uses and categorisations intended by the producers in Europe, and to develop own categorisations based on existing and evolving African world views. Thus in the first half of the twentieth century, African consumers were less concerned with specific brands, and more with locally invented categories such as 'money gin'. The theme of African consumers' agency also helps us to appreciate the specific understanding of sections in the market which the producers

and marketers of alcoholic drinks worked with after World War II: rather than to distinguish between segments for fermented drinks and distilled liquors (as was the case in Europe and North America), in West Africa the key segmentation was between branded drinks and non-branded drinks. Thus even 'global' brands such as Henkes gin or Heineken beer have been domesticated in West African societies through local agency, rather than through the successful imposition of their European meanings and brand identities.

Finally, the history of branding provides insights in the changing relation of alcoholic drinks with individual and collective identities. Where anthropological studies of alcohol in Africa have noted the importance of ritual consumption of alcohol for collective belonging and kinship, the brand strategies in West Africa of foreign and local producers were often much more focused on consumption as an expression of individual identity.<sup>6</sup> Over time, different types of branded and non-branded alcohol have been associated with identities in different ways. Branded beers in particular appear to have been successful in engaging with an emerging urban consumerism, whereby individual identities were constructed through the selective adoption and rejection of particular (often foreign) goods.<sup>7</sup>

### **Trade and consumption of liquor in West Africa between modernity and tradition**

Before the arrival of imported distilled liquors, West Africans mainly enjoyed two types of alcoholic drinks: palm wine and millet beer. These drinks are still common in the region. Both are produced through fermentation, and need to be consumed within days or at most weeks of production. The production and sale of millet beer was often in the hands of women, while the tapping, distribution and consumption of palm wine was the domain of males.<sup>8</sup> Eighteenth-century evidence indicates some trading of millet beer and palm wine at coastal markets. However, the majority of alcohol consumption was localised and not commoditised.<sup>9</sup> The rise of trading in alcohol is thus associated with imported liquors.

Wine, brandy, and rum have been part of the trade between Europe and West

Africa since the seventeenth century. They were joined by gin in the eighteenth century, and by beer in the twentieth century. Liquor did not dominate the import trade, but it always constituted a substantial part of the parcel of goods exchanged. Rum was by far the most important liquor until the middle of the nineteenth century, probably because it could be supplied at the lowest price.<sup>10</sup>

Akyeampong and others have argued that alcohol use in Africa has shifted from 'integrated' traditional drinking to become increasingly commoditised, and that this went together with increasing social dislocation. Alcohol was, however, never fully commoditised, and imported liquor was partially de-commoditised through its integration into the ritual sphere. Willis has shown how alcohol became both a commodity *and* a ritual resource, whereby the boundary between the two aspects has remained continually contested.<sup>11</sup>

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, imported liquor had four main uses in West Africa. A first use was consumption through social or individual drinking, which seems to have occurred mainly in the coastal areas, where liquor was more affordable than in the hinterland. In the interior it was only consumed in considerable quantities during weddings, funerals, and festivals. This latter, ritual, use was the second main function, and contemporary observers such as Mary Kingsley reported that a large portion of total liquor imports was thus employed.<sup>12</sup> Very widespread, especially throughout the Niger Delta and its hinterland, was the use of imported liquor, particularly gin, as currency, whereby the bottles and cases were kept intact. Bottled gin was not the only imported good used in this way: a wide variety of items were used as money, including gold dust, cowrie shells, iron and brass rods, manillas, foreign silver coins, cloth, and salt.<sup>13</sup> Conspicuous display – the fourth use of imported liquor – was also very widespread. Imported goods such as gin, textiles and gadgets, indicated social status through the display of wealth, style, and access to wider networks, and also because they could be converted into the fundamental values of the African political economy: dependants and dependency. This function of imported goods became even more important when slavery declined during the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup>

The patterns of use continued to change during the twentieth century. The use of imported gin as currency gradually declined after colonial administrations

introduced new currencies and insisted that taxes, school fees, and cash transactions with European businesses all had to be paid in the new currency. Eventually, the only remaining uses of gin as currency were ritualised ones: as part of the payment of the bride price or of traditional rulers' fees.<sup>15</sup>

During the economic depression of the 1930s the individual and social drinking of imported liquors declined dramatically, as many consumers could no longer afford the imported drinks and switched to the much cheaper local illegally distilled liquors. The unaffordability of imported liquors was partly intentional, as colonial administrations had been raising duties on imported liquor over the years in response to pressure from anti-liquor trade activists. Their aim was to reduce the consumption of alcohol, but they had not anticipated the rise of illicit distillation.<sup>16</sup> Once the depression years were over, illegal gin continued to be consumed in large quantities as the price difference with the imported liquors remained considerable. Additionally, from around World War II consumer preference shifted towards drinks with lower alcoholic content, in particular bottled beer.<sup>17</sup> Imported drinks continued to be used to display status, but the exact type and brand became increasingly important. To offer Dutch gin for social drinking was certainly not a sign of sophistication or status, but the right brand of whiskey or beer could be.

### **The emerging of brands**

For many years, which specific gins and whiskeys were imported into West Africa was mainly determined by availability and price. When a distiller managed to reduce the price of their product below that of the competition, then that drink was imported regardless of its brand or label. This was the case in the 1880s, for instance, when German producers of gin and rum adopted the recently developed column still technology, which allowed them to distil drinks with a more constant quality out of cheaper ingredients. During these years there existed therefore concern among French and British traders that such cheaper drinks gave German merchants a trading advantage, allowing them to undersell the competition. In 1883 it was reported that in Porto Novo the German firms were selling their gin for between 2½ and 3 gallons of

palm oil, while other firms could not lower their price below 4 gallons.<sup>18</sup>

Price was indeed a major consideration for most African consumers, as was unit size: the smaller the amount, the larger was the group of people who could afford to purchase at least some. West Africa was a significant market for European exports. This was the result of the particular crops grown there that European and North American industry required, as well as the sheer number of small producers, rather than a reflection of the purchasing power of individuals. The vast majority of African farmers could only afford to spend a small amount of money on the purchase of imported goods: all imported items, no matter how cheap from a European perspective, were expensive in West Africa. The amount of labour involved in producing enough palm oil to buy even a single bottle of gin could be up to twelve days, including growing, harvesting, processing and transportation.<sup>19</sup> While drinks imported in casks often had a lower cost per gallon, only a few wealthy chiefs or merchants could afford to purchase an entire cask. To reduce the unit cost for other consumers, the contents of the cask would have to be transferred into smaller containers, giving rise to the problems of watering down and contamination. When the 1909 Liquor Trade Committee reported on the sale of spirits in Southern Nigeria, it observed that most had been diluted, often through unhygienic methods.<sup>20</sup>

One reason, therefore, for African consumers to purchase branded bottled drinks, was that the closed, sealed bottle with specific labels promised some degree of guarantee that the contents would be pure.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the colour and shape of the bottle provided African buyers with an indication of what type of drink they were purchasing, even when they were not looking for particular brands. An example would be those buyers who were looking for specifically clear spirits to pour libation for the ancestors:<sup>22</sup> to them the characteristic shape of gin and schnapps bottles provided reassurance that they would not be purchasing coloured drinks such as brandy, whiskey or dark rum. This is reflected in the local names used in Nigeria for Dutch gin: 'square face' and 'four cornered' referred to the characteristic, square bottles used for this product. The square shape had not been intended as a marketing gimmick. It had been adopted by Dutch export distilleries because it allowed the bottles to be packed tightly in wooden crates, thus reducing the likelihood of breakage during transport.<sup>23</sup> West African consumers experienced and concluded that clear gin

came in such bottles only, and hence sales suffered when the same product was imported in a slightly different bottle. In a meeting with representatives of the African Traders Company, for example, Chief Herbert Jumbo of Bonny explained how another importer had unsuccessfully tried to sell gin in bottles with a ribbed appearance. Therefore, he emphasised, the African Traders Company should 'on no account allow' their distiller to supply bottles with a ribbed appearance in the glass.<sup>24</sup>

Given the above considerations, although nineteenth-century African consumers paid attention to the trademarks, labels and other elements of brand identity on the bottles, they may not have recognised them as indicative of specific brands. Nevertheless, by 1900 Europeans inside and outside the liquor trade observed that certain brands of liquor were particularly popular: Henkes' Stork brand gin was found across coastal Ghana; Melchers' Elephant brand gin was said to be widespread in Eastern Ghana and Western Nigeria; while Peters' gin was ubiquitous in the Niger delta area and Cameroon.<sup>25</sup> Like the other producers, Peters used the picture of an animal on its bottles – in this case a dog with a bird in its mouth (known as the *Schnapshund*). These trademarks reflected the racist assumption – widespread among European producers – that the use of animals and bright colours would be attractive, and easy to identify, for African consumers.<sup>26</sup>

The choices of African merchants appear to indicate a growing importance of brands in this period. In 1896 G. B. Williams, who operated from Keta in Eastern Ghana, specifically requested Henkes gin 'as this is the only thing in demand.'<sup>27</sup> Several years later, the trader Mrs Williams tried to return a shipment of whiskey to her supplier, as it was not the specific brand that she had ordered.<sup>28</sup> Another indication for the growth of brands is the drawing up in this period of exclusive distribution deals between distillers and trading companies. In 1901, for instance, a group of merchants including F. & A. Swanzy, Millers, and the African Association negotiated an agreement with the Melchers distillery for the exclusive right to sell Elephant Gin in Eastern Ghana and Togo. Pointing out that he annually supplied 50,000 cases of Elephant Gin to his existing trading partners in that area (fourteen English, twelve German, five French, two Belgian, and two Dutch firms), J. J. Melchers demanded strict guarantees for a minimum number of orders from the partners in the agreement: 'I shall lose from the firms whom I have to refuse my Elephant Gin, and when above

Firms are not willing to fill up the wanting I should be obliged to consider the Agreement as of no value.<sup>129</sup> While the agreements were designed to protect the prices of popular brands in the face of strong competition, they also carried risks. Melchers noted: 'When monopolising the Elephant Brand on the Coast and the sale at quite higher prices, I fear it will lead to an introduction of other Brands which will be sold at lower rates and decrease my trade.'<sup>130</sup> The problem for Melchers was that, although Elephant Gin was sold in large quantities, the brand was not strong enough to support a price premium: Elephant was – and remained – a cheap gin. This is reflected in a further agreement from 1912 between Melchers and nine trading companies from Germany and the UK. The parties agreed they would not import any other brand of bulk 'trade gin' into the area than Elephant Gin, but that they were free to import the more expensive gins, such as Henkes' Prize Medal Gin or Old Tom Gin, that were not in competition with Elephant Gin.<sup>31</sup>

Dutch producers for the West African market similarly attached increasing importance to brands. As early as during the 1880s, distilleries such as Henkes differentiated their products in cheaper and premium brands, with those gins marketed as 'schnapps' being among the most expensive. These differences were communicated through the packaging. Henkes, for example, would place their schnapps bottles in an additional carton before placing them in wooden crates, while they stacked their other gins in the crates without such extra packaging.<sup>32</sup> Meanwhile, the Blankenheym & Nolet distillery wrapped the bottles of their Telmans brand schnapps gin in blue paper, attached a 'medical certificate', and packed the bottles in specially planed cases, the smoothness of which was designed to communicate that this was not ordinary gin.<sup>33</sup> Distillers used a range of features to distinguish their products from those of the competition: they adopted trademarks, which they registered (a recent innovation) and defended; they stuck colourful labels on the bottles that proclaimed authenticity; they used glass seals with easily identifiable symbols; they used special seals over the closures to indicate the product had not been tampered with; and they painted the wooden cases that contained the bottles in bright colours. Of course all these techniques could – and were – also used by distillers to make an undistinguished product resemble that of a successful competitor. In some cases, such lookalikes were made specifically to the requirements of trading companies, but produced and shipped



without brand name or the name of the producer to avoid detection; a separate shipment contained the labels to be attached to the bottles locally.<sup>34</sup>

It is unclear to what extent African consumers were aware of brands at this time. The broad array of bottles from different suppliers found during excavations of disposal heaps in Eastern Ghana suggests that, at the very least, a strong sense of brand loyalty had not yet developed by the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>35</sup> However, the fact that liquor stores tended to stock various brands of gin, sold against different prices, indicated that customers did not simply buy whatever was available, and that they were prepared to pay a premium for specific types of gins, such as 'schnapps' gins, and perhaps also for specific brands.

### **Imitations and local meanings of trademarks**

Attempts to mislead customers regarding the origin of a particular gin, as well as outright imitation of popular brands, were widespread in the export gin industry. Gin producers in Hamburg often produced under labels that claimed the drink was made in Schiedam in Holland.<sup>36</sup> Meanwhile, Dutch distillers invented imaginary companies that they located in Hamburg. The Dutch firm of Herman Jansen, for example, shipped gin that was allegedly produced by the African Trading Co. in Hamburg. The labels on the bottles showed a depiction of 'the Steam Distillery of the African T. Co.', which was simply a (rather poor) drawing of Jansen's own company in Schiedam.<sup>37</sup> Imitation was not limited to gin: by 1882 the imitation of trademarks for many imported products – including cotton goods, tobacco, soap and perfumery – was widespread in the trade with West Africa.<sup>38</sup>

Brand owners were constantly alert to possible infringements of their trademarks. However, brands of gin intended for the West African market had often very similar prominent features, which made it hard to determine what constituted a clear trademark infringement. One example of this is the inclusion of exhibition medals on the labels.<sup>39</sup> One well-known example of such a label is that of Henkes' Prize Medal brand, which showed an arrangement of medals awarded at exhibitions in London (1862), Amsterdam (1866) and Paris (1867). The labels that Netherlands

Distilleries used for the private label gins it produced for trading companies showed prize medals arranged in a pattern identical to that on the Henkes label. The medals displayed were about ten years younger than those on the Henkes label, which suggests that the trading companies were ordering imitations of the Henkes brand. The same goes for the exhibition medals on Blankenheym & Nolet's 'Prize Medal Geneva' and the label of Herman Jansen's gin. The prize medals on the label of E. Kiderlen's 'Celebrated Schiedam Geneva' are arranged in a different pattern, and date from the late 1860s and the 1870s. The German firms Nagel and Herwig each had one prize medal embossed on their gin bottles. Meanwhile, the Hasekamp distillery used a 'Coin Medal' label, which instead of exhibition medals showed a number of coins from different countries, arranged in a similar way as the medals on the 'Prize Medal' labels.<sup>40</sup> With this Coin Medal label, Hasekamp showed a good understanding of the West African market, where exhibition medals were unknown, and the various brands with such medals were all known as 'Money Gin' – *Oti Olowo* in Nigeria or *Cavegevi* in Ghana.<sup>41</sup> Another example is the common depiction of a stork or other bird on glass seals and labels. In addition to the stork used by Henkes, labels carried such diverse birds as ibis, godwit, spoonbill, heron, crane, swallow and finch. Although the names on the labels were different, there appeared to have been room for confusion among the purchasers of the drinks, which were often children sent by their elders to buy from the stores. Even though the purchasers took care to buy 'the one with the bird on the shoulder' and also examined other features of the packaging such as the cork and the label, sometimes 'the moment you have a taste of it, you would realise that it is a different brand altogether.'<sup>42</sup> Such confusion had of course been intended by the producers and traders who had introduced these lookalike brands.

Europeans believed that illiterate Africans were very easy to deceive. In 1904, a German distiller offered gin for sale that was packaged to look like Henkes' popular Stork brand gin. They argued: 'see, our label is almost the same as that of Henkes, even though it displays our company name. These Negroes do not look at the name, but at the trademark, prize medals and Stork, and in those respects the labels are practically identical.'<sup>43</sup> This is a manifestation of the idea – commonly held among Europeans during the first decades of the twentieth century – that illiterate Africans were not only unable to read and write, but that they also had difficulty picking up on

the nuances in a drawing or photograph: they did not know how to 'read' a picture. Colonial authorities, producers and merchants alike concluded that Africans might be easily confused by differences between competing labels and trademarks that would be immediately obvious to European consumers. The implications of this were clear to the colonial state: as inexperienced consumers, colonial subjects required more protection than the citizens of European states, and therefore trademarks legislation would have to be interpreted differently in the colonies than in Europe.<sup>44</sup>

The consequences of this principle are clearly visible in a range of court cases about disputed trademarks in courts in the Gold Coast and Nigeria, held mainly during the 1920s and 1930s. These disputes concerned trademarks for all sorts of products, including cutlery, clothing, wool, tobacco, candles, soaps, detergents, toothpastes, food and indeed liquor. In most of these cases, judges took the view that a slight degree of resemblance between any two trademarks was sufficient to deceive the average illiterate African consumer. In the dispute over the 'Guinea Fowl' and 'Turkey' trademarks, for instance, judge Osborne concluded that the new 'Turkey' trademark had been calculated to deceive: 'It is easy to portray a turkey in such a manner that it can by no possibility be mistaken for a guinea fowl, even by the most unsophisticated savage, but unfortunately the French company's turkey, with its drooping tail, has unconsciously assumed an attitude as nearly resembling that of Millers' guinea fowl as any turkey can reasonably be expected to assume.'<sup>45</sup> Things were not so clear-cut when Netherlands Distilleries opposed Melchers' attempt to register their 'Bull' brand gin in the Gold Coast because it resembled their 'Buffalo' brand. Judge Hall pointed out a number of obvious differences between the two brands, concluding: 'I do not think it could seriously be contended that in a country of literates these two marks so nearly resembled each other as to be calculated to deceive.' However, he then turned to consider 'the conditions obtaining in this Colony where there are so many illiterate people.'<sup>46</sup>

To shed further light on how trademarks are interpreted locally, the court cases called a number of African witnesses, and it is through them that the records of these cases provide insights into the local meanings of gin brands. Most witnesses challenged the idea that illiterate African consumers would not be able to distinguish between trademarks simply because they could not read. Karimu Kotun, a Muslim

trader who dealt in gin, confidently stated that 'I should not confuse it', adding: 'I sell to illiterates... I think a bush native would know the difference although he cannot read the letters.' When re-examined he elaborated 'I have known a native bring in the label to show what he wants.'<sup>47</sup> However, not all witnesses could tell the disputed labels apart. In the case of the Turkey and Guinea Fowl trademarks, both witnesses called for the defendant were unable to easily distinguish the brands. The first, 'on being shown a small print of the guinea fowl on the basket at once pronounced it to be a turkey, and it was not until he saw the designs on a large scale that he realised his mistake.' The other witness, a buyer for caravans, 'when shown a coloured label with the turkey design seemed in doubt at first as to which was the right side up, but having established that to his satisfaction identified it first as guinea fowl, then as a turkey, and wound up saying he did not know the difference on paper owing to bad eyesight, an obviously lame excuse.'<sup>48</sup>

In all these cases, the court and litigants assumed that African consumers had a similar understanding of what a trademark stood for as European consumers had, and that the issue was one of potential confusion between trademarks. However, the evidence of Gilbert Idowu in a case relating to labels depicting 'Prize Medals', points in a different direction: according to this Nigerian gin trader, his customers would not distinguish between any of the labels with medals or coins on them, regarding them all as *Oti Olowo* – Money Gin.<sup>49</sup> This is not to say that his customers assumed that all these gins came from the same producer, but rather that all these gins could be used for the same purpose of presenting to a chief or elder and being used for libations.

The decision by African consumers not to differentiate between similar trademarks from competing producers was not a consequence of their being illiterate, or of their supposed inexperience in matters of consumption, but rather reflected different meanings assigned to the goods. As a result, the labels on gin bottles functioned less to indicate a brand identity, but rather to place it in a category of goods with a specific 'market name'. Like other popular imported commodities such as cloth, the different categories of gin were given African market names by which they were recognised. In Nigeria, Melchers' 'Bull' brand gin, Netherlands Distilleries' 'Buffalo' gin, and Hasekamp's 'Nyala' brand, would all be known as *Oti Onimalu* – 'cow gin'. Other market names for gins included *Onikokoro* ('key') and

*Alade* ('crown'). As with cloth, market names were assigned to the goods by African traders and consumers, not by the European producers. It was only the popular gins and the popular cotton prints that acquired market names; having a market name was a sign that a product had been accepted. Furthermore, just as cotton prints could be produced by different factories and still carry the same market name, it appears that African consumers during this period did not particularly care about who made their 'Money' gin: a producer who made a gin with a label that showed coins arranged in a way that resembled existing prize medal gins, was not infringing on someone else's trademark, but merely placing his good in the specific category of 'Money' gin. This was a perspective that was difficult to accommodate within formal trademark legislation, but it did result in a widespread awareness among African consumers of specific features that could be turned into a brand identity.<sup>50</sup>

It is of course not surprising that imported liquors acquired local identities that made sense in the context of existing yet continually changing African world views, rather than the brand identities intended by the foreign producers. This in part reflects the agency of African consumers, but it was also a consequence of the limited means that producers and importers had at their disposal to back up their trademarks and other product branding during most of the colonial period. Up until World War II there were few means to reach African consumers through advertising. West African newspapers had a very limited readership and radio was in its infancy. From the 1920s onwards cinemas existed in towns and cities, which offered opportunities for advertising. Yet, in West Africa cinema adverts appear to have become common only after World War II. Posters, metal signs and billboards were widespread, and used to advertise products such as 'Ovaltine' cocoa-flavoured malted drinks and 'Good Year' tyres. However, even this medium could not be used to promote imported gin brands due to colonial restrictions on the sale of 'trade spirits' which limited opportunities for advertising.<sup>51</sup> This situation would change after World War II, when restrictions on imported liquors were lifted, urban wages increased, available audiences and media space rapidly expanded, and an advertising and marketing industry developed.

### **Brands and the local production of alcohol**

The rise of local illicit distillation during the 1930s had created a distinction between branded and non-branded distilled liquors as well as a local discourse that required the use of specific branded 'foreign' drinks for chiefs and shrines. While African consumers did not recognise specific individual brands, the categorisation on the basis of packaging and trademarks was important in determining local meanings, indicating which use a bottle of gin would have, and which drink would be purchased. This provided a basis for the post-World War II building up of brand identities through newspaper advertising, billboards, point-of-sale promotions and event sponsorships. It was not just imported gins that stepped up their advertising and branding during this period: the promotion of many other consumer products similarly increased. The change was partly in response to the changing distribution channels during the decolonisation period, when the large European-owned trading companies gave way to smaller, locally-owned trading businesses.<sup>52</sup> Branding was particularly important for the introduction of locally produced beer. Unlike the illicitly distilled local liquors, the local beers were relatively expensive quality products. For a locally brewed bottled beer to be successful, its brand had to communicate convincingly that its quality was as good as that of the imported beers.<sup>53</sup>

Imported bottled beers had gained popularity in West Africa from the 1920s, but had very different uses and meanings than bottles of gin. Bottled beer was used for social or individual drinking, was an indication of status achieved in the modern sector of society (in contrast to the traditional status communicated through gin), and had no particular ritual meanings or role as local currency. Its popularity started among Europeans and subsequently spread to urbanised Africans who appreciated the lighter taste, were attracted to its image as a 'modern' drink and its association with European lifestyles and values, and who could afford it. When the locally-produced beers came to the market, they needed to have the same quality as the imported beers, as well as similar labels and packaging, to create a 'modern' or European feel. The marketing campaigns for the local 'Star' beer, introduced in Nigeria in 1949 and in Ghana in 1958, integrated newspaper advertisements; radio and cinema adverts; bottle design, labels and packaging; publicity vans and events; as well as collaborations with high-class bars and restaurants that served Star beer.

According to these advertisements, Star beer was enjoyed by modern, successful 'men of distinction' in the company of their sophisticated friends. To these messages was soon added the 'Sammy Sparkle' character: a cheeky, animated version of the Star trademark, that was supposed to communicate the enjoyment that Star beer offered. In subsequent years, the branding and marketing for Star beer would gradually evolve in response to market research. The 'Men of Distinction' faded to the background as Star beer was increasingly positioned to represent 'enjoyment' for successful modern middle class men and women. Other beer brands, such as Guinness and Club, similarly invested in consistent and well-known brand identities.<sup>54</sup> This brand building was very successful. For many non-Muslim West African middle class males, which brand of beer they drank became part of their identity.

Importers of distilled liquors also began to strengthen their brand identities after World War II, using a mix of newspaper advertising, billboards and sponsorships. This was in part a reaction to the loss of sales due to the rise of local illicit distillation, but also an attempt to capitalise on the new opportunities for consumption that had emerged after the war. The strategy was to compensate the sales lost to illicit gins at the lower end of the market with increased sales to members of the growing middle classes (including government officers, junior managers, chief clerks, and small businessmen) and skilled workers. They positioned their whiskeys, gins and brandies in a way that was similar to that of beers, which was of course not surprising, as they were targeting the same segment of the market.

During the 1950s and 1960s, brands for beer and distilled liquors all referenced modernity, status and success. Such emphasis captured the general popular mood during the decolonisation years and was also in line with trends in West African marketing more generally. The proposed brand identities thus appear to have been well suited for the intended market. They also reflected a more general trend in the global liquor industry to develop premium brands and position these as luxury products, appreciated by stylish and successful people. The strategy was generally successful in West Africa and elsewhere, as consumers who could afford to do so, claimed sophistication by purchasing the premium brands of beer, whiskey or brandy. To present the proper brand of liquor to your guests, to know your drinks, and to consume them in the appropriate fashion, was one of the means through which

identity, status, and aspirations could be expressed.<sup>55</sup>

In addition to the similarities, there were also differences. The first is the amount of money spent on branding: the marketing budgets for the locally produced bottled beers were significantly higher than those for the imported brands of beer and distilled liquors. The local beers were new entrants in a market which associated modernity, style and quality with foreign imports. Not only had the brand features of imported beers become familiar since the 1920s, they also had the advantage of being foreign. During the first decades of local brewing, much had to be invested in convincing the public that the local brands were as modern and of the same high quality as international brands. This was a slow process: in Nigeria it took fifteen years before the demand for local bottled beer outstripped that for imported beer.<sup>56</sup> Another reason for the higher spend on marketing research, branding and advertising for local beers, was the high cost of failure compared to importation: the new breweries represented significant investments. It is thus not surprising that the first successful modern brand identities were those of bottled beers.

Meanwhile, although the marketing of imported liquors followed similar brand strategies, the outcomes differed. This partly reflected the much smaller amounts of money spent on branding including advertising and market research (no formal, professional market research appears to have been commissioned).<sup>57</sup> It also reflected the extent to which the brand message corresponded with the meanings that African consumers had already given to imported drinks. For example: the brand message that Chivas whiskey was a sophisticated drink suitable for offering to highly-valued guests was acceptable, because whiskey had not already been integrated in local culture as a requirement for traditional rituals. In fact, already in the late-nineteenth century, whiskey had been consumed by wealthy males in drinking clubs in coastal towns, where they emphasised their position through a conspicuous display of modernity and of their knowledge of the 'foreign'.<sup>58</sup> The same claim was, however, not acceptable when made for Henkes schnapps gin. One series of adverts used in Ghana and Sierra Leone, shows a successful man in Western-style suit and tie, holding a telephone (an important indication of success, modernity and up-to-date technology), while his secretary is sitting at her desk behind him, typing something on a type-writer. The copy varied, but might run: 'To be successful in business, a man must enjoy good



health and vitality. I have always found J. H. Henkes Star Brand Schnapps so healthy and invigorating'.<sup>59</sup> Another long-running series of adverts that tried to position Henkes schnapps gin as an attribute of middle-class modernity were based around illustrations of evidently successful, smiling African males, dressed in European clothing, who relax in style with a glass of Henkes schnapps gin. They entertain in stylish homes with modern furniture, a radio set and sometimes a television, or they frequent high-class bars and restaurants. The brand attributes claimed in these advertisements were entirely unbelievable to the intended urban middle class target audience that had already decided that Dutch schnapps gin was a drink associated with an old-fashioned, traditional, rural Africa. They thus rejected the claims and the drink. Meanwhile, those who purchased bottles of Dutch gin did so to present the gin to a chief or elder or to use it for a visit to a shrine or to pour libation. They knew what the drink should be used for, and the advertising campaigns did not convince them to start drinking the gin at occasions where other drinks – often the much cheaper illicitly distilled gin – were more commonly used. Even though very similar to the campaigns for other drinks, the brand campaigns for these gins did not succeed in communicating the intended brand identity, and failed to lift the declining sales.

By 1970, advertising and marketing for imported Dutch gins had changed to emphasise brand identities that drew associations with the use of gin for traditional rituals and the status of chiefs and elders. Billboards now showed chiefs dressed in traditional cloth, wearing sandals, often pouring libation. The accompanying slogan might read: 'When tradition calls, it's Henkes Schnapps!'<sup>60</sup> This brand identity did fit with the existing uses and meanings of the gins, and was accepted by the target audience – now no longer the urban middle-classes, but those needing imported bottled gin for ritual uses or to present to a chief or elder for hearing a case. This clarified the brand identity for most imported schnapps gin brands. Some brand identities became especially strong, however. In Ghana, Henkes schnapps was particularly associated with the requirements of tradition, while in Nigeria Seaman's schnapps held this same position.<sup>61</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Rather than being a straightforward reflection of the development of brands and marketing in the global liquor industry, the rise of brands for alcoholic drinks in Ghana and Nigeria was closely associated with local uses, understandings and debates. It reflected the agency of African consumers, and was associated with their ideas about modernity and tradition, and about individual and collective identity, in various ways that changed over time. During the first half of the twentieth century many branded alcoholic drinks were imported, but African consumers often interpreted brands in different ways from that intended by European marketers. Around 1900, trademarks and other aspects of brand identities had become important to African consumers as a way of deciding to which use-category an imported liquor belonged. Such categories were defined independently from European categorisations, and although trademarks were carefully scrutinised, there was no intention to purchase a particular brand of gin, but merely a bottle of gin that could be used for a specific – ritual – purpose. Clearly, African consumers read the labels and trademarks very different from how the marketing people had intended them to be read, but they still opted for the branded and bottled imported gins. Branding in the first half of the twentieth century was therefore a 'working misunderstanding'. This changed around 1950, when, starting with bottled beers, more European-style brand identities emerged which African consumers understood in the ways the marketing people had intended. Several of these brands – particularly those of bottled lager beers and whiskeys – became part of individuals' subjective identities, in contrast to the earlier association of palm wine or millet beer with collective identities. In the case of imported Dutch gins, however, this did initially result in a 'non-working understanding', as consumers rejected the proposed brand identity of these gins as a feature of modernity. In response new brand identities were developed that emphasised the link of imported Dutch gin to African traditions. These new brand identities were accepted by African consumers as they fitted more closely with the local meanings that had already been accorded to these drinks.

Although branded drinks became important or even essential for particular types of consumption during the twentieth century, this did not mean that non-branded drinks disappeared. Palm wine and millet beer continue to be consumed, and

a new type of non-branded alcohol – illicitly distilled gin – emerged during the 1930s and has remained very popular. When discussing the marketing of alcohol and its various impacts, a distinction is often made between low-alcohol drinks such as beer on the one hand, and distilled liquors on the other. By the 1960s, however, for companies selling alcohol in West Africa, the market was split rather differently: between branded and non-branded drinks. The UAC Breweries Division worked on the assumption that there was 'probably a large overlap of beer and spirit drinkers', and regarded whiskey equally as competition for its premium beer brand as the other premium beers on the market. Meanwhile it was clear that the drinkers of millet beer or palm wine, were very unlikely to be persuaded to drink the much more expensive bottled beer.<sup>62</sup> The brand identities of beers and distilled liquors had resulted from processes of re-interpretation and negotiation between on the one hand African consumers, who used trademarks, labels and packaging as part of the clues to decide how to integrate these imported products into existing world views and patterns of consumption, and on the other hand the efforts of marketing managers to steer consumption and to define and protect brands.

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